

White Blindness¹

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Abstract: According to Socrates and Aristotle, we fail to do what is right because we lack *propositional moral knowledge* – knowledge that an action is morally required and thereby what we ought to do. In contrast, David Hume and Adam Smith argue that moral inaction occurs when we lack the right sorts of emotions and desires. I argue that Martin Luther King Jr. offers a position that differs from what philosophers have standardly offered as a model of how moral motivation works. King believed that people fail to do what is right not merely because they lack propositional knowledge but also because they lack *phenomenal moral knowledge* – knowledge of what it is like to be victimized by a particular wrong. King believed that without this knowledge the right sort of emotions and desires that are needed for moral motivation are unlikely to be activated. The strength of King’s view is that it ties together what is right in both of the first two theories and establishes a coherent theory of moral motivation. Furthermore, few philosophers have considered the question of how moral motivation works in relation to the sustained fight against racial injustice during the mid-twentieth century. The key insight of King’s work – and that is also relevant to those working outside of philosophy – is that white Americans will be more motivated to join the fight against racism if they can come to know what it is like to be victimized by racism.

A central problem for Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement, more generally, and the Birmingham Campaign, more specifically, was the inaction of the white moderates. King had assumed that he would have the support of the white moderates, especially the clergymen among them, in the movement to end racial segregation. He was wrong. The white moderates not only did not personally join the movement but also counseled those in the movement not to demonstrate. Indeed, they counseled King and his supporters not to do anything outside of engaging in “open and honest” discussion and, instead, encouraged them to wait patiently for the courts to end racial segregation.² King was both surprised and frustrated by this response. He explained,

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this need. Perhaps I was too optimistic; perhaps I expected too much. I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action (LBJ, 103).

King was not the first to confront the problem of moral inaction. In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates famously argued that people failed to do what was right because they were ignorant. On this view, if the white moderates failed to play an active role in opposing racial segregation, this was because they did not know that racial segregation was morally wrong. If they only knew better they would not fail to do what was right.

Many have held that Aristotle offered a similar view. Like Socrates, Aristotle believed that one could not both know that something was right to do and then fail to do it. Aristotle explained moral action in terms of the “practical syllogism.” In the practical syllogism, “the one [major] premise or judgment is universal and the other [minor premise] deals with particular (for the first tells us that such and such a kind of man

¹ Acknowledgements . . .

² See “[Statement of Alabama Clergymen](#),” April 12, 1963.

should do such and such a kind of act, and the second that this is an act of the kind meant, and I am a person of the type indicated)” (*De Anima* 434a15-20). According to Aristotle, the conclusion of the practical syllogism is an action. As he explains, “I need a covering and a cloak is a covering, I need a cloak. What I need I ought to make; I need a cloak, I ought to make a cloak. And the conclusion ‘I ought to make a cloak’ is an action . . . That the action is the conclusion [of the practical syllogism] is quite clear” (in *De Motu* 701a20-24).³ When someone knows the major and minor premises of a practical syllogism and draws a conclusion from them – e.g., I ought to make a cloak – then he will be moved to act. Knowledge of the conclusion is supposed to be overridingly motivating – that is to say, its motivating power overcomes any desires or inclinations not to act. If an individual fails to act, then, according to Aristotle, this is proof that he has not reached the syllogism’s conclusion. What he ultimately lacks is propositional knowledge – knowledge that the action is morally *required* and is, thereby, what he ought to do. This is true even if he – like the white moderates – claims to know what is right. According to Aristotle, he would be much like an actor on stage who gives the correct answer to a particular question but, strictly speaking, does not know what he is talking about (*NE* 1147a10–24).⁴ The individual cannot properly be said to have unqualified knowledge; in a way he has knowledge, but in a way he does not (*NE* 1147a14). Like the actors, the white moderates might also be said to lack unqualified knowledge. They knew enough to talk the talk – that is, to say the “right” thing at the right time – but they may not have known that racial segregation was wrong.

Faced with white inaction, W.E.B. Du Bois reached a different conclusion. The white moderates were not like Aristotle’s actor. According to Du Bois, white Americans knew that racism, in its various guises, was wrong.

For many years it was the theory of most Negro leaders that . . . white America did not know of or realize the continuing plight of the Negro. Accordingly, for the last two decades, we have striven by book and periodical, by speech and appeal, by various dramatic methods of agitation, to put the essential facts before the American people. Today there can be no doubt that Americans know the facts; and yet they remain for the most part indifferent and unmoved.⁵

Du Bois believed that black Americans had carried out a vigorous campaign of moral education and that, through exposure to the basic moral facts and rational moral arguments, white moderates had come to know that racism was wrong. Yet, despite this, they still weren’t moved to act.

Frederick Douglass agreed with Du Bois. He too believed that most white Americans already knew on the basis of rational moral argumentation that slavery and other forms of racism were morally wrong.

³ Kant can also be understood as arguing for a similar model of moral motivation. Kant argues that we should act on universal moral principles. These principles can be understood as the equivalent of the first premise of Aristotle’s practical syllogism. When supplemented with additional information about the type of act that is at stake – that such and such an act is the kind required by the categorical imperative – the conclusion should be an action, on Kant’s view. For example, imagine the categorical imperative leads us to conclude that we have the moral duty to end racial segregation (this is the major premise of the syllogism) and we learn that ending Jim Crow will end racial segregation (this is the minor premise). On Kant’s view, the result (or the conclusion of the syllogism) should be acting to end Jim Crow.

⁴ All references from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) refer to Terence Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics*. 2ed. Indianapolis (1999): Hackett Publishing Co.

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, “A Negro Nation within a Nation,” in Cary D. Wintz (ed.), *African American Political Thought 1890-1930* (New York: Sharpe, 1996), 161.

Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty? that he is the rightful owner of his own body? You have already declared it. Must I argue the wrongfulness of slavery? Is that a question for Republicans? Is it to be settled by the rules of logic and argumentation, as a matter beset with great difficulty, involving a doubtful application of the principle of justice, hard to be understood? How should I look to-day, in the presence of Americans, dividing, and subdividing a discourse, to show that men have a natural right to freedom? speaking of it relatively, and positively, negatively, and affirmatively. To do so, would be to make myself ridiculous, and to offer an insult to your understanding. — There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven, that does not know that slavery is wrong *for him*.⁶

On Douglass's view, white Americans knew by inference on the basis of true premises that slavery was wrong. Yet, they still lacked motivation to end slavery. This suggests that knowing the major and minor premises of a moral argument, and drawing a moral conclusion from them – i.e., that slavery is wrong – was not enough to motivate the white moderates to act. For Douglass, white inaction was evidence that Aristotle's practical syllogism as a model of moral motivation was flawed. According to Douglass, what was needed to rouse white Americans to action was not more rational moral argumentation and propositional knowledge, but something else:

It is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled.⁷

We can understand Douglass as drawing a distinction between, what we might call, “motivational intellectualism”⁸ – the view that all that is needed for moral motivation is moral knowledge – and “motivational non-intellectualism” – the view that something other than moral knowledge – e.g., emotions or desires – is needed for moral motivation. Beyond Aristotle and Socrates, the former approach has also been attributed to Plato, and Kant.⁹ Douglass, like David Hume and Adam Smith, favored the latter approach, holding that intellectualism ignored or overlooked – or, at least, vastly underestimated the importance of – other motivational forces such as emotions and desires.

King's own answer to the question of white inaction suggests that the debate between intellectualists and non-intellectualists is not so simple. On King's view, the white moderates were, by definition, white Americans who believed that racial segregation was wrong. King argued that “blindness was the trouble” with the white

⁶ Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” July 5, 1852.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ This view is also sometimes referred to as “ethical intellectualism” or “Socratic intellectualism.”

⁹ Defenders of the “intellectualist” interpretation of Aristotle include David Bostock, *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); W.F.R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, 2nd Ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968 (1980)); David Wiggins, “Weakeness of Will, Commensurability, and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire” in Amelie Oskenberg Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 241-65. Defenders of the “intellectualist” interpretation of Socrates include Alexander Nehemas, “Socratic Intellectualism,” in his *Virtues of Authenticity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 24-58; George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (London: Murray Publishing, 1865). Plato is also standardly interpreted as an “intellectualist” with the qualification that the knowledge that is sufficient for virtue is knowledge of the Forms. See J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth, 1977). For related views, see John Cooper, “The Psychology of Justice in Plato,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1977): 151-157; Terrence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Richard Kraut, “The Defense of Justice in the Republic” in his (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). On Kant's apparent “intellectualism” see fn. 3.

moderates (STL, 35).¹⁰ It was the cause of most forms of racial injustice: “the whole system of slavery was largely perpetuated by sincere though spiritually ignorant persons. This tragic blindness is also found in racial segregation, the not too distant cousin of slavery” (STL, 38). The white moderates lacked vision, on King’s view, because they lacked in “wisdom born of experience” (STL 36). Though the white moderates knew that racism was wrong, they didn’t know what it was like to be victimized by racism.¹¹ In more detail, he explained:

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you ... take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” and “colored”; when your first name becomes “nigger,” your middle name becomes “boy” (however old you are) and your last name becomes “John,” and your wife and mother are never given the respected title “Mrs.”; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair (LBJ, 69).¹²

On King’s view, the white moderates failed to act because *they didn’t know what being victimized by racism was like*. They didn’t know what being victimized by racism was like because they had never experienced what it was like before. As L.A. Paul suggests, “this sort of knowledge, that is, knowing what it’s like, can (practically speaking) *only* be had via experience.”¹³

Admittedly, this is just one way of reading King on the question of white inaction. A benefit of interpreting King in this way is that it leads us to a position that is interestingly different from what the intellectualists and non-intellectualists have standardly offered as a model of how moral motivation works. King was an avid reader of Aristotle and (Plato’s) Socrates and Du Bois and Douglass. Seeing the strengths of both positions, he may have been lead to accept a position that straddled the divide between them. Like the intellectualists, King believed that ignorance was the problem and that this problem could be solved by the acquisition of more moral knowledge. However, he believed that the moral knowledge that was needed for moral motivation was not merely *propositional knowledge* – something that can be known through inference on the basis of rational argumentation. He believed the moral knowledge that was needed to move people to act was *phenomenal moral knowledge* – knowledge of

¹⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010) (hereinafter referred to as STL).

¹¹ In some cases, this blind spot was the result of not knowing the moral facts. Some people, such as Birmingham Police Commissioner Bull Connor, genuinely didn’t seem to know that racism was wrong. They believed that the white race was in fact superior and that whites ought to have had the privileges they did. King, at times, referred to this sort of “blindness” as “intellectual and spiritual blindness” (STL 35). In these cases, King argued that the belief in white racial superiority was often a form of rationalization, a way of giving moral sanction to systems that benefitted white Americans (STL, 37). This type of ignorance – where people didn’t know that racism was wrong –wasn’t King’s focus, however. Like Du Bois, King believed that many, if not most, white Americans already knew that slavery and racial segregation were morally wrong. This seems right at least with respect to the white moderates. According to their own testimony, the white moderates knew that racial segregation was morally wrong. Yet, they were still unmoved.

¹² Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in his *Why We Can’t Wait* (London: Signet, 2000); herein and after referred to as *LBJ*.

¹³ L.A. Paul, “What You Can’t Expect When You Are Expecting,” *Res Publica* 92.2 (2015), 6).

what it is like to be victimized by a particular wrong. Phenomenal moral knowledge is a category of knowledge in its own right; it cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge. Additionally, it is distinct from mere phenomenal experience such as qualia and uninterpreted or raw emotions. To have phenomenal moral knowledge of a wrong such as racism is to know what being victimized by that wrong is like. In the case of racism, this involves experiencing the particular sense of suffering that racism gives rise to. Coming to know what it is like to experience this suffering does not in itself move us to act. Rather, knowing what it is like gives rise to a sense of righteous indignation – anger at the injustice of racism – which, in turn, leads to an intensified desire to end racism. This desire makes action to end racism more likely. Like the non-intellectualists, King believed that emotions and desires played a central role in moral motivation. The difference between King and the non-intellectualists is that he believed that the relevant desires and emotions were activated through acquisition of phenomenal moral knowledge. In short, King can be said to argue for a position that incorporates the insights of both Aristotle and Socrates, on the one hand, and of Du Bois and Douglass, on the other.

In this paper, I explore King's views about white blindness and white inaction. Since his arguments to support these claims are sometimes incomplete,¹⁴ I also develop independent grounds for these claims. Even if King's claims are somewhat underdeveloped in his own work, they are worthy of further philosophical investigation. In emphasizing the motivational role of phenomenal moral knowledge, King articulates a modification of the standard intellectualist and non-intellectualist pictures of moral motivation, and gives a view that has not been explored in detail before. This view will be of interest to anyone who is interested in the nature of motivational failure. However, King's view also has significance outside of meta-ethical debates about moral motivation. It offers an interesting account of how injustice is perpetuated and suggests some potential routes to overcoming these influences. Racial injustice persisted in America because the white moderates didn't know what being victimized by racism was like. I tentatively suggest that direct experience is not necessary to know what it is like to be victimized by racism. King may have held that the white moderates could vicariously experience and come to know what it was like to be victimized by racism through engaging with his writings. I suggest that King may have believed that, as works of literary art, his writings had the power to evoke the right types of vicarious experiences in his readers and, in turn, to promote their acquisition of phenomenal moral knowledge. I close by discussing other means of vicariously experiencing being victimized by racism and the role they might play in overcoming racial injustice.

1.

According to King, racism is a dogma of superiority: it is “the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to hereditary inferiority and another group is destined to . . . superiority” (WDWG, 73).¹⁵¹⁶ This ideology gives rise to both individual

¹⁴ King was primarily concerned with initiating a movement. It only makes sense for reasons of expediency that he did not always work out his arguments to their fullest.

¹⁵ While King focused on the biological rationales behind racism (i.e., a belief in “hereditary superiority”) in his discussion, he would certainly have allowed that racism could be and was based on cultural

and institutional forms of racism. “If a man asserts that another man, because of his race, is not good enough to have a job equal to his, or to eat at a lunch counter next to him, or to have access to certain hotels, or to attend school with him, or to live next door” (WDWG, 74), then he is a racist and the man he speaks of is a victim of racism. Racism is also – and perhaps most importantly for King – the “justificatory device” behind the institutions of colonialism, slavery, and racial segregation (WDWG, 73).

King believed that (anti-black) racism has a unique phenomenology:¹⁷ being a victim of racism gives rise to a distinct experience of suffering.

The central quality in the Negro’s life is pain – pain so old and so deep that it shows in almost every moment of his existence. It emerges in the cheerlessness of his sorrow songs, in the melancholy of his blues and in the pathos of his sermons. The Negro while laughing sheds invisible tears that no hand can wipe away . . . the Negro knows that a cloud of persistent denial stands between him and the sun, between him and life and power, between him and whatever he needs . . . Negro Life! Being a Negro in America means being scarred by a history of slavery” (WDWG, 110).

Racial segregation was similarly scarring. Take, for example, the signs, “no blacks” and “whites only,” that were commonly posted outside of restaurants or drinking fountains during racial segregation. These signs expressed the view that black Americans were inferior to white Americans, that black Americans were not considered worthy of being in the same space as white Americans or of having access to the same resources as white Americans. They suggested that the preferences of black Americans – to eat, drink, and live in particular places – did not count as much as the preferences of white Americans. Because of the racist messages it expressed, racial segregation was humiliating and, according to King, “drained” black Americans of their sense of “somebodiness” (LBJ, 75). Black Americans came to feel that they were not regarded as persons at all. They were “nobodies” – under the law and in interactions with their white peers in public and in private.¹⁸ This is what Du Bois referred to as “civic death”¹⁹ and, later, Orlando Patterson and John Rawls, drawing on Patterson’s work, have referred to as “social death.”²⁰ More recently and perhaps more aptly, Claudia Rankine has referred to this phenomenon as “erasure.”²¹

rationales. For example, the view that black Americans are inferior because of their culture is a form of racism, on King’s view. During his time, cultural racism was perhaps somewhat less prevalent than biological racism. This likely explains his focus on biological or hereditary racism rather than cultural racism. Whether it is held for biological or cultural reasons, the key component of racism is a belief in the inferiority of another race.

¹⁶ Audre Lorde had a similar definition of racism: “Racism. The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance, manifest and implied.” See her “Women Responding to Racism: The Uses of Anger,” in her *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crown, 2007), 124-133.

¹⁷ For the most part, in the course of this paper, I use the term “racism” to refer to anti-black racism.

¹⁸ In a related vein, Michele Moody-Adams has argued that it is very difficult to maintain your sense of self-respect under conditions of racism. See her, “Race, Class and the Social Construction of Self-Respect,” *The Philosophical Forum* 25.1-3 (1992-1993): 251-266.

¹⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994), 33.

²⁰ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition, n. 35, p. 33, “Slaves are, so to speak, socially dead: they are not recognized as persons at all.” Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

²¹ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (Minneapolis: Greywolf, 2014).

In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois described a related experience, namely, the experience of, what he called, “being a problem” which, in his view, generalized to the “Negro” experience.²²

In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards – ten cents a package – and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall new comer refused my card – refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap; in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil (Souls, 2).

It is at this point that Du Bois realized that he “was a problem.” Du Bois’s darker skin, the veil he speaks of, prevented him from being included not only in social interactions like this but also in public and political ones too.

The suffering that resulted from knowing that he was “a problem” stemmed from double consciousness.

The Negro is a sort of seventh son gifted with a sort of second sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, --an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Souls, 2).

Throughout the course of their lives, black Americans vacillate between two perspectives: the “American” – which is really the perspective of the “white American” since only white individuals were considered full citizens - and the black individual. As black individuals, they value themselves and rightly see themselves as worthy of dignity and respect. In contrast, when they view themselves from the perspective of the white American, they are lead to have a degraded sense of self. They come to view themselves as “being a problem” or, to use King’s language, as being inferior to white Americans. Black individuals experience a conflict or tension between the two perspectives they vacillate between. This experience is painful. The suffering involved is not merely the result of a degraded sense of self but is also the result of a sense of a double or fragmented consciousness.²³

King held, whether in the form of slavery or racial segregation, being black in America centrally involved the experience of suffering from racism. Through multiple experiences of racism under Jim Crow, black Americans came to know what this suffering was like. In contrast, the white moderates did not know what it was like to be victimized by racism. King explained,

[o]ver and over again it is said in the black ghettos of America that ‘no white person can ever understand what it means to be a Negro.’ There is good reason for this assumption, for there is very little in the life and experience of white America that can compare to the curse this society has put on color (WDWG, 110).

²² Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 67f.

²³ Frantz Fanon offered a related view, when he wrote, “I start suffering from not being a white man insofar as the white man discriminates against me; turns me into a colonized subject; robs me of any value or originality; tells me I am a parasite in the world, that I should toe the line of white world as quickly as possible, and ‘that we are brute beasts; that we are a walking manure, a hideous forerunner of tender cane and silky cotton, that I have no place in the world. So, I will try quite simply to make myself white; in other words, I will force the white man to acknowledge my humanity” (Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Revised Edition. (New York: Grove Press, 2008, 78).

White Americans hadn't experienced (anti-black) racism and the sense of suffering that came with constantly being victimized by it. As a result, they didn't know what it was like to be black in America. They didn't know what it was like to "fight a degenerating sense of nobodiness" (LBJ, 70). On King's view, this lack of knowledge explained why the white moderates weren't moved to end racial segregation.

King didn't say much about how he viewed the connection between knowing what it was like to suffer from racism and being moved to eliminate racism. However, we do get some beginning clues if we look at King's writings about his own life.

King came from a middle-class family and lived a comfortable early life. He grew up steeped in the tradition and sense of community that the Southern black ministry offered. Both his father and maternal grandfather were Baptist preachers. He spent his childhood in an area known as "black Wall Street" in Atlanta, which was home to some of the country's most prosperous black businesses. It was only later that he experienced racial segregation. King wrote, a few "incidents happened in my late childhood and early adolescence that had a tremendous effect on my development" (*Autobiography*, 6).

As a young boy, King had a white playmate. He was the same age as King and lived across the street. When they started school – at separate schools – the friendship began to dissolve. Eventually, the boy told King that his father said that they couldn't play together any more. King said that he would never "forget what a great shock this was to him" (*Autobiography*, 7). King immediately asked his parents why the boy would say such a thing.

We were at the dinner table when the situation was discussed, and here for the first time I was made aware of the existence of a race problem. I had never been conscious of it before. As my parents discussed some of the tragedies that had resulted from this problem and some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it, I was greatly shocked and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person. As I grew older and older this feeling continued to grow (*Autobiography*, 7).

King recounted another formative event, a trip to a downtown shoe store with his father, where a white clerk politely said,

"I'll be happy to wait on you if you'll just move to those seats in the rear."

Dad immediately retorted, "There's nothing wrong with these seats. We're quite comfortable here."

"Sorry," said the clerk, "but you'll have to move."

"We'll either buy shoes sitting here," my father retorted, "or we won't buy shoes at all" (*Autobiography*, 8).

King's father took him by the hand and walked out of the store. This was the first time King had seen his "Dad so furious" (*Autobiography*, 8). King wrote,

that experience revealed to me at a very early age that my father had not adjusted to the system, and he played a great part in shaping my conscience. I still remember walking down the street beside him as he muttered, "I don't care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it" (*Autobiography*, 8)²⁴

A few pages later, King tells us of a trip he took when he was fourteen with his teacher, Mrs. Bradley, from Atlanta to Dublin, Georgia. On the way home, the white bus driver ordered King and Mrs. Bradley to give their seats to the white passengers that were boarding. King hesitated for a moment and the bus driver began cursing at them. King considered staying in his seat, but his teacher encouraged him to stand up and obey the

²⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., ed., Clayborne Carson, *Autobiography* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2001) (hereinafter referred to as "Autobiography").

law. King wrote, “that night will never leave my memory. *It was the angriest I have ever been in my life*” (*Autobiography*, 9; my emphasis). He continued,

I had grown up abhorring not only segregation but also the oppressive and barbarous acts that grew out of it. I had seen police brutality with my own eyes, and watched Negroes receive the most tragic injustice in the courts. I can remember the organization known as the Ku Klux Klan. It stands on white supremacy, and it was an organization that in those days even used violent methods to preserve segregation and to keep the Negro in his place, so to speak. I remember seeing the Klan actually beat a Negro. I had passed spots where Negroes had been savagely lynched. All of these things did something to my growing personality (*Autobiography*, 10).

King told us about his early experiences of racial segregation because of the role that they played in moving him to participate in the Civil Rights Movement. As we can see, King was not moved to act immediately after his first experience of racial segregation. He did not act after his best-friend said goodbye. He did not act in the store with his father. He did not act on the bus with Mrs. Bradley. Rather, he acted much later, after many more experiences of racial segregation. Through an accumulation of experience, King came to know that the suffering that he and other black Americans experienced as a result of racism was not, as he initially thought, merely at the hand of white Americans or a result of their hatred. It was more global than this. Racial segregation meant that black Americans were pervasively treated as inferior across a variety of social domains and in multifarious ways. Through experience, King came to understand how his particular experiences of racism and the suffering that resulted fit into a larger systematic experience of racism. King came to see that racial segregation was not merely the result of wrongdoing on the part of individual white Americans; it was also the result of an unjust system, a system that King, like his father, could never accept. It was knowing what it was like to suffer from *systemic racism*, not merely knowing that it was wrong, that was key to his being motivated to end it. As with his father, it was this knowledge that led to a sense of “*righteous indignation*”. King and his father were not the only ones to respond to systemic racism with indignation. Audre Lorde also claims that anger was her response to experiencing the pervasiveness of racism:

Women responding to racism means women responding to anger; the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation . . . My anger is a response to racist attitudes and to the actions and presumptions that arise out of those attitudes.²⁵

Righteous indignation is the form of anger that arises in response to injustice. Righteous indignation is, in part, cognitive. It is a way of apprehending one’s situation in response to one’s experiences. Multiple experiences of racism led King, his father, and Lorde to see their situations as patently unjust.²⁶

This is a fitting response on their part. An attitude is fitting when it is appropriate, correct, or warranted. An attitude can be a purely subjective attitude, as is the case when it merely reflects something that belongs exclusively and contingently to our minds. It can also reflect the mind-independent or real world correctly. When this happens the attitude is an appropriate or fitting response. For example, fear is a fitting attitude when

²⁵ Audre Lorde, “Women Responding to Racism: The Uses of Anger,” in her *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crown, 2007), 124.

²⁶ In *Anger and Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford, 2016), Martha Nussbaum argues that King rejected anger as a proper response to the wrongs that he and his followers had suffered from. This discussion suggests that she has not interpreted King correctly.

you not only regard something as dangerous, but when it really is dangerous. King and Lorde's indignation is fitting. Their situation is unjust and they are right to see it as such.

Indignation is also inherently motivating. It was the driving emotion behind King's response to the clergymen in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

After I was placed in a cell in solitary confinement, a newspaper was slipped to me. I turned it over and found a kind of advertisement that had been placed there, taken out by eight clergymen of all the major religious faiths in our nation. They were criticizing our demonstrations. They were calling us extremists. They were calling us law breakers and believers in anarchy and all of these things. And when I read it, I became so concerned and even upset and at points so righteously indignant that I decided to answer the letter" (*Autobiography*, 187).

Once King perceived his situation as unjust, it became intolerable. He had to do something to change his situation immediately. He could wait no longer. It was his sense of righteous indignation that motivated him to write the "Letter" and to participate in the movement. Indignation was central to King's picture of motivation. As Harry Belafonte said, "Martin always felt that anger was a very important commodity, a necessary part of the black movement in this country." Indignation was important to the movement because it could rouse people to action.

Indignation motivates us to act because it has the tendency to alter our priorities. If we know that racism is wrong, we are likely to have at least a weak desire to end racism. However, we also know that acting to end racism comes with grave risk. Black Americans might be fired from their jobs, harassed, and even lynched for their actions. For this reason, when we are calm and in calculation mode, we might resist the desire to end racism, believing it is outweighed by the risks associated with taking action to end it.²⁷ When we are indignant, the calculation changes. As our indignation grows stronger, the relative importance of ending racism significantly increases, while that of the associated costs decreases.²⁸ The desire to end racism comes to take priority.

This shift in priorities isn't sudden and it isn't usually acquired propositionally. It is something that we tend to acquire over time through experience. Through experience, we come to know what being victimized by racial segregation is like. We come to see our situation as an injustice and thereby as intolerable, as something that must be eradicated immediately, even if doing so requires significant sacrifice on our part. This is why, when we are indignant, we become more likely to engage in action aimed at ending racism, even in the face of significant costs to ourselves.

Contrary to what some might think, a person isn't necessarily less virtuous when she is indignant.²⁹ Indignation can be a prelude to the moral virtue of bravery. According to Aristotle, bravery requires "standing firm" against what is feared. Fear is defined as an

²⁷ This is important, for the risks of acting to end racial segregation were significant for black Americans. King wrote, it "is always costly and never altogether comfortable, may mean walking through the valley of the shadow of suffering, losing a job, or having a six-year-old daughter ask, "Daddy, why do you have to go to jail so much" (STL, 19). The risk of being beaten or killed in the case of black Americans was and still is high.

²⁸ Jennifer S. Learner, Roxana M. Gonzalez, Deborah A. Small, and Baruch Fischhoff, "Effects of Fear and Anger on Perceived Risks of Terrorism: A National Field Experiment," *Psychological Science*, 14.2 (2003): 144-150. Though, note that, the general assumption that anger increases risky decision making may be subject to some qualifications. For example, the context of a risk-taking opportunity may dictate whether anger leads to greater or lesser acceptance of risk. On this see, Jolie Baumann and David DeSteno, "Context Explains Divergent Effects of Anger on Risk Taking," *Emotion* 12(6):1196-9.

²⁹ See Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford, 2016).

“expectation of something bad” (*NE* 3.6.1115a9) or “painful” (*NE* 3.9.1117a33-34), in particular, an imminent threat of grave harm or death (*NE* 3.6.1115a35), and it is linked with a desire to avoid these things.³⁰ As Aristotle argues, a truly brave person is someone who stands firm against what is feared because doing so is “fine” or “noble” and because doing anything else is “shameful” (*NE* 7.13.12-13; *NE* 3.6.1115a30-32). Brave individuals do what is right solely because it is right to do so, not merely because it is in one’s self interest or because it is easy or safe. As David Pears suggests, the high value of the good or noble goal outweighs the impulse to avoid the danger and thereby moves one to act.³¹ As I have suggested, something similar applies when we are indignant about racism. When we are indignant, the goal of ending racism comes to be of high value, outweighing the value of avoiding the risks of acting. Bravery requires taking on risks for the sake of doing what is right. This is why indignation is whipped up in soldiers during a war. Pointing to the injustice of the situation and encouraging soldiers to be righteously indignant makes them more likely to enter the battlefield, even when their own lives are at risk. They are moved to do what is right in a way they couldn’t be, if they were calm.

While indignation can get us out of our seats, it might not always move us to do what is right. It can lead to recklessness, to our acting without thinking or caring about the consequences for ourselves or others. In particular, Aristotle worried that excessive confidence may lead people to over expose themselves to risk (*NE* 3.1115b25-30). Indignation may play an important part in over exposure by leading to excessive confidence. Indignation leads us to downplay the risks of action and overvalue the likelihood of success. For this reason, anger may move us to put ourselves at risk unnecessarily. This seems especially likely given that other desires and inclinations that might prevent us from taking action are outweighed when we are indignant.

King didn’t say much if anything about this sort of over exposure. The main problem, on his view, was inaction not too much action, so to speak. On his behalf, we could begin to respond to this worry by noting that being indignant does not necessarily mean that one is a lover of danger – that is, that one has a desire for danger as such.³² As Aristotle says, the brave person finds the dangers that she faces fearful in one way, but not fearful in another: as a person she finds them fearful; as a brave person she does not find them fearful. This suggests that in general the brave person wishes to avoid harm, but all things considered is willing to risk it. The brave person’s desire, is all things considered; and “it cannot begin to exist until the agent actually has considered all things and weighed them up.”³³ While anger can and often does overridingly motivate us to take action, this is defeasible. The indignant person is only ready to face danger when he believes that it will actually help him to achieve justice. When all things are considered, if it is not rational to act, then the brave person will not be moved to do so (*NE* 3.7.1115b10-15). The brave person, even when indignant, will not over expose herself to danger.

A further worry is that, as Homer suggested in the *Illiad*, indignation can make even sensible people flare up and get caught in violent quarrels (18.105-110). King was

³⁰ David Pears, “Courage as a Mean” in Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (ed), *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, Berkeley (1980): University of California Press, 174.

³¹ *Ibid*, 171-187.

³² David Pears, “Aristotle’s Analysis of Courage,” *Philosophical Exchange*, 7.1 (1976): 43 – 52 at 50.

³³ *Ibid*, 50.

well aware of this concern. He talked about anger and its potential role in the race riots of Watts and New York. He acknowledged that anger, because of its potential for violence and other forms of reckless behavior, could be “a destructive passion.” King also believed that anger could be “harnessed by directing that same passion into constructive channels.”³⁴ The important thing, for King, was to use our indignation for good and not evil. Part of this involves cultivating a sense of indignation without a desire for retaliation.³⁵ King stipulated that “we must not flirt with retaliatory violence or drink the poisonous wine of hate. Our aim must not be to defeat the white man or pay him back for past injustices heaped upon us.”³⁶ Instead, we must approach white individuals with a sense of love, forgiveness, and friendship. He further cautioned, “we must not retaliate with external physical violence or internal violence of spirit. We must not allow ourselves to become bitter.”³⁷ In saying that we ought not become bitter, King meant that we must not allow ourselves to take our anger “out on other people;” we must not be “mean” to them.³⁸ This makes sense. If we wish to eliminate the source of our righteous indignation and discomfort, our actions must be directed at the true cause: the racist social and political system of the United States. Perhaps, this is why King constantly directed his supporters to focus their efforts on legal, political, and social change.

While our sense of indignation may initially move us to act, over time it may slowly devolve into a deep sense of despair – which can be a significant barrier to action. Initially, anger may blind us to the importance of collective action, since anger is consistently linked with optimism about the success of our own actions. When we are angry we tend to believe that we can make things better through our own actions, which makes us more likely to take action on our own.³⁹ However, once we have taken a few actions on our own – say, after we have written a letter to congress and stopped shopping at stores that posts racist signs – we will eventually come to see that the true source of our indignation has not been eliminated. It will become clearer that our individual action is unlikely to succeed on its own. The growing awareness of the importance of collective action may eventually lead us to a sense of despair. Despair results from a perceived lack of agency. When we despair we believe that the cause of our suffering is ineliminable and that our individual actions are unlikely to change the situation. We become unlikely to

³⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., “Advice for Living,” September 1-30, 1957. Available at: http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol04Scans/356_Feb-1958_Advice%20for%20Living.pdf

³⁵ This is in direct contrast to Aristotle’s notion of anger. He believed that anger, by definition, involved the desire for retaliation.

³⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., “The Negro and the American Dream,” Excerpt from Address at the Annual Freedom Mass Meeting of the North Carolina State Conference of Branches of the NAACP, September 25, 1960. Available at: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/negro-and-american-dream-excerpt-address-annual-freedom-mass-meeting-north>

³⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., “Address at the Fourth Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change at Bethel Baptist Church,” December 3, 1959. Available at: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/address-fourth-annual-institute-nonviolence-and-social-change-bethel-baptist>

³⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., “Unfulfilled Hopes,” April 5, 1959. Available at: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/unfulfilled-hopes-0>

³⁹ Jennifer S. Learner and Dacher Keltner (“Fear, Anger, and Risk,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81.1 (2001): 146-159) argue that “angry people expressed optimistic risk estimates and risk-seeking choices . . . Moreover, estimates of angry people more closely resembled those of happy people than those of fearful people.”

take action, ultimately believing that our efforts would be wasted. Other responses to despair such as avoidance may become more likely. To avoid the despair that racism gives rise to, one might simply form an adaptive preference – such as the desire “to keep to one’s place” – that encourages passivity rather action.

Ultimately, it may not be enough for each of us to have a personal feeling of indignation in isolation from others. Action over the long term may require a sense of collective indignation. When we share in a sense of indignation with others, we are more likely to take action. As both David Hume (T 3.2.2.10) and Rawls⁴⁰ suggest, we need some reassurance that other people are also willing to do their part before we are willing to do ours. This is only rational when our goal requires collective action. We will only succeed in ending racial segregation if other people also take action to end it. Given the effort and risk involved, it seems right to seek reassurance that other people are also willing to do their part before we do ours.

Indignation, when it is shared with others, can provide the reassurance we need. For example, imagine the two of us, strangers, are sitting in a boat. To move forward, both oars must be pulled at the same time in the same direction; this is a difficult task and cannot be accomplished by one person on their own. If we both have a desire to reach the beach and this is expressed and known to both of us, then each of us will be more likely to pull our oar. I am willing to pull my oar, in large part, because I know that you are willing to do so too. Something similar holds true in the case of acting to end racial segregation. We know that abolition of racial segregation requires all of us to do our part. We are willing to do our part to end racial segregation so long as we know others are willing to do so too. If we are both indignant, and we know this to be the case, we can be said to have a shared sense of indignation. This shared sense of indignation makes it more likely that both of us will actually take action. When we both know that we are indignant, that we find racial segregation intolerable and in need of immediate end, we have reassurance that the other person will do her part and we are thereby motivated to do ours.

Social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement are important, in part, because they are a way of revealing and encouraging a shared sense of indignation. Social movements begin when people are brought together, whether in the basements of Churches or in public courtyards, and they learn of one another’s indignation. Cooperative action arises gradually, and acquires force by a slow progression, and through repeated experiences of success and failure. Shared experiences assure us further that indignation has become common to all of us and gives us confidence of the future regularity of each other’s conduct. Secure in the conviction that others are just as outraged as we are, we continue to be moved to do our part. It is primarily in the context of a social movement that indignation makes us more likely to engage in the sort of long-term action that is necessary to overcome racism.

Return now to the white moderates. The white moderates knew that racism was wrong and they knew this without actually suffering from racism. As Douglass suggested, this was done on the basis of inference from true premises. But, on King’s view, mere intellectual appreciation of racism’s wrongness does not have the

⁴⁰ J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, Expanded Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 446-47; *see also* p. xlv.

motivational oomph that is needed for action to end it; one must also come to know what it is like to suffer from racism.

As mentioned, phenomenal knowledge of being victimized by racism is especially important when other priorities are at stake. Though the white moderates knew that racism was wrong, they had an interest in protecting their own physical and social lives. Like black Civil Rights activists, white Civil Rights activists were beaten, jailed, and murdered for their actions. White Civil Rights activists were labeled “nigger lovers” or “race traitors” and were socially ostracized and publicly condemned (LBJ 48).⁴¹ Many were also worried about the social disorder that would likely result from the movement against racial segregation.⁴² Many also felt a sense of despair because few other white individuals were taking action. So, while the white moderates wished that racism would end, because they knew it was wrong, their desire was likely weak, especially when contrasted with their other more self-oriented desires. Phenomenal knowledge of racism is important, in part, because it is powerful enough to override these other desires. When the white moderates come to know, through experience, what it is like to suffer from racism, they will be infused with a sense of indignation and will thereby be more likely to act to end racism. This is especially true in the context of a social movement.

I have tried to show that, for King, coming to know, through experience, what it is like to be victimized by racism can be very important to moving people to act to end racism. One might wonder, does this mean that the only way forward is for white moderates to experience racism? While this would be most consistent with his approach, King wasn't claiming that everyone had to experience racism to be motivated to change things. King's view was more complex than this. He was keenly aware of the fact that these experiences were potentially inaccessible to many of the white moderates. While experience of being victimized by racism could be important to moving people to end racism, it was not always necessary. He believed that self-interest could act as a substitute for this type of experience. For example, King used economic boycotts, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, to make it uncomfortable for the white moderates to continue as they were. In Montgomery, 75 percent of passengers on the bus were black Americans. Without these passengers, the bus company would have faced serious financial difficulties and likely bankruptcy. In the face of an economic boycott, the costs of inaction became higher than action and the buses were eventually desegregated.

All of this said, King believed that appealing to the self-interest of the white moderates was not the best way of motivating them. He strongly preferred experiential routes to moral progress. King had pragmatic and moral reasons for this preference. He

⁴¹ In a similar vein, King wrote, “Many sincere white people in the South privately oppose segregation and discrimination, but they are apprehensive lest they be publicly condemned” (STL, 14).

⁴² Sarah Buss notes, “even when one has reached the conclusion that a group of people in one's community are being treated unjustly, if this treatment is widely accepted, it is difficult to summon the motivation needed to try to change the situation. This is in part because it is always difficult to overcome inertia. But it is also because ‘rocking the boat’ usually has unpleasant consequences. At the very least, tensions are bound to develop with people whose friendship one values; one is sure to be misunderstood in ways that hurt; and, of course, one will fall even farther behind on one's projects, and will have to settle for completing them in ways that leave a bad taste in the mouth. Even when the costs are limited to these, the people in one's most immediate circle will share them. And, of course, the costs are not always so limited The most oppressive regimes generally arrange things so that the costs of resisting are quite high” (Sarah Buss, “Reflections on the Responsibility to Resist Oppression with Comments on Essays by Boxill, Harvey, and Hill,” *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 41.1 (2010): 40-49).

was not interested in a temporary end of racial segregation. He was in search of what he called a “permanent peace.”⁴³ He counseled against actions aimed at the self-interest of the white moderates because he thought that they were unlikely to lead to permanent peace and justice.

King’s worries parallel Rawls’s worries about a *modus vivendi* – where people cooperate because of shared material interests. As Rawls noted, this type of agreement may be unstable and unlikely to last over the long run.⁴⁴ When one party’s material interests are no longer satisfied they may no longer have the motivation to participate in the arrangement and it may have a tendency to fall apart.⁴⁵ If cooperative action to end racial segregation is a *modus vivendi*, then the threat of dissolution might always be looming. The worry is that, as soon as the arrangement fails to satisfy their material self-interest, the white moderates might revert to the status quo.

Furthermore, even if imposing costs on the white moderates was effective in securing a permanent peace, this wouldn’t necessarily be, to use a phrase from Rawls, “stability” or permanent peace for the right reasons. The white moderates would be acting out of material self-interest – an interest in protecting themselves – not necessarily out of the recognition of the injustice of racial segregation. King, like Rawls, wished to ensure a just and stable society for the morally right reasons, where citizens were not only completely sincere in their belief that racial segregation was wrong but also in their efficacious commitment to ending it permanently.

On King’s view, the most likely way to achieve stability for the right reasons was through the experience of racism, particularly, the experience of suffering that is essential to being a victim of racism, and coming to know what being victimized by racism was like. Experiences of suffering have the power to open up minds, so to speak, and thereby have the power to genuinely change people’s desires and behavior. The suffering that we experience can be transformed, through the acquisition of moral phenomenal knowledge, into a “creative force,” thereby spurring more consistent and continued action to end racism.⁴⁶

2.

⁴³ Martin Luther King Jr., “The Quest for Peace and Justice,” Nobel Lecture, Dec. 11, 1964.

⁴⁴ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 147.

⁴⁵ While Rawls did generally believe that *modus vivendi* agreements were unstable, he did allow that, in some cases, they could evolve into something more long lasting and stable. For example, his account of the *modus vivendi* after the religious wars in Europe was that it started off as a recognition of the balance of interests in favor of peace. However, as Protestants and Catholics learned to live together in peace and to cooperate, they came to affirm the settlement as just, and not merely as self-interested. At this point, people no longer adhered to the peaceful arrangement as a mere *modus vivendi*. They adhered to it for the right reasons, so to speak. King was perhaps more skeptical than Rawls regarding the possibility of a *modus vivendi* leading to permanent peace for the right reasons.

⁴⁶ In “Suffering and Faith,” *Testament to Hope* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003), 41, King wrote, “as my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive.” Here, King suggests that suffering can redeem both white and black Americans by transforming their behaviour.

On King's view, we are more likely to be moved to eliminate racism when we know what being victimized by racism is like. We can come to know what it is like to be victimized by racism through experiences of racism. This raises the question, is direct personal experience necessary to acquire this sort of knowledge? Are those not victimized by racism able to have the experiences necessary to acquire this knowledge? Are there alternative routes to acquiring it?

2.1

Typically, when we are attempting to understand what it would be like to be in a situation without having experienced it before, we attempt to extrapolate from our own past experiences. We make estimations and predictions about what future situations will be like based on an examination of past situations that we have experienced before. One might wonder, then, why can't we use our own experiences of suffering to know what it is like to suffer from racism? Drawing on our own experiences seems like an especially promising route to take, since King believed that it is knowledge based on our own experiences that moves us to act.

Extrapolation is unlikely to work in the case of racism. On King's view, being victimized by racism involves an experience of a distinct type of suffering. Laurence Thomas makes a similar claim.⁴⁷ General suffering, such as the suffering that results from cutting a finger, is something that can happen to anyone with a body, irrespective of his or her social identity.⁴⁸ The experience of cutting a finger when one is a child may be qualitatively different from the experience of doing so when one is an adult, but these experiences are more similar to one another than they are to the experience of suffering on the basis of racism. Suffering related to one's social identity, as in the case of racism, is qualitatively very different from general suffering that is not linked to one's social identity, as in the case of cutting a finger. The difference is not one of degree. The suffering that is experienced after seeing a "whites only" sign is of a different type than cutting your finger or having a brick land on your toe. In the case of racist signs, the suffering is due to recognition of how others regard you. It is an expressive injury. Expressive injuries wound us differently and perhaps more deeply than material injuries caused by impersonal forces such as itinerant bricks. Adam Smith argues,

what chiefly enrages us against the man who injures or insults us, is the little account which he seems to make of us, the unreasonable preference which he gives to himself above us, and that absurd self-love, by which he seems to imagine, that other people may be sacrificed at any time, to his conveniency or his humour. The glaring impropriety of this conduct, the gross insolence and injustice which it seems to involve in it, often shock and exasperate us more than all the mischief which we have suffered (*Theory of Moral Sentiments* II.3.1).

What hurts so deeply about racist signs is the insulting message that they convey – namely, that black Americans are inferior to white Americans – and the sense of psychological fragmentation that this message leads to. Insofar as the insult and pain are experienced as part of a broader racist system or set of institutions, they are also experienced as an injustice. This is in contrast to the brick that falls on our toe or the

⁴⁷ Laurence Thomas, "Moral Deference," *Theorizing Multiculturalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 359-381.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 363.

paper that cuts our finger. We do not see the paper and the brick as insulting us and we do not experience the harms they cause as injustices.

What about those who have experienced social suffering, say, on the basis of gender? Can women extrapolate from their own experiences of systematic prejudice and discrimination to know what it is like to suffer from racism? White women may have greater insight than, say, white men, into what racism is like. As Thomas suggests, “the relevant experiential and psychological distances between their lives will be less than such distances between their lives and those who do not belong to any diminished social category” (Thomas, 364). There is, of course, some overlap in the experiences of black people and white women. Yet, the overlap is not likely to be complete. White women do not tend to endure the same hostile experiences than black people do. For this reason, white women won’t, on the basis of their own experiences, know what it is like to experience racism and to suffer on this basis. Something similar can be said of black men in relation to the experiences of black women. A black man doesn’t, on the basis of his own experiences, know exactly what it is like to experience racism as a black woman. Fine-grained types tend to matter to experiences of social suffering.⁴⁹ This may help explain why coalitional politics between feminists and anti-racists and even between black men and black women can be difficult.

This discussion suggests that extrapolation will not generally work in the case of racism. If you have not experienced racism before, you generally cannot extrapolate from your own experiences to know what being a victim of racism is like. This is something that you are more likely to know through your own experiences of racism.

2.2

Another common route to knowing what it would be like to be in a situation without having experienced it before is to seek out complete factual descriptions of what it is like. One might wonder, why can’t we know what it is like to be a victim of racism on the basis of other people’s (factual) descriptions of their experiences?

Miranda Fricker’s work on testimonial injustice⁵⁰ suggests that biases and prejudices, implicit and explicit, prevented the white moderates from being able to take the descriptions that they are provided with into account appropriately. White moderates were likely to be led by their biases to distrust black Americans and, as a result, to discount their descriptions about their own experiences. Indeed, part of King’s frustration in the “Letter” was feeling like he wasn’t being heard by the clergymen. King had tried, to little avail, to explain to white Americans the nature of the race problem and what it was like to suffer from racism in America countless numbers of times before, and they still counseled him to wait.

Additionally, taking black American’s descriptions about their experiences of racism seriously requires white moderates to acknowledge their own privilege. In hearing

⁴⁹ Thomas carries these arguments further, suggesting that even more fine-grained types may matter to racism. For example, he suggests, a light skinned black man does not know exactly what it is like to experience racism as a dark skinned black man (Ibid., 363). This may be right. It does, however, raise the question of how to delineate fine-grained types of racism, since one could potentially continue to do so infinitely. I will not try to answer this question here.

⁵⁰ See her *Epistemic Injustice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

about the suffering that racial segregation causes black Americans, white moderates will have to contend with the fact that they do not experience a similar sense of racial suffering. They will have to acknowledge that black suffering is caused by a system that entrenches the inferiority of black Americans and benefits the white moderates. Acknowledging this privilege is likely to lead to feelings of guilt among white moderates. The white moderates are likely to feel badly about their role in black suffering and the benefit that they receive in connection to black suffering. To the extent that humans tend to avoid feelings of guilt, the white moderates have reasons not to take black Americans' descriptions of racism seriously. Self-interest and self-protection may lead white moderates to discount the descriptions that they are provided with. Again, even when complete descriptions are available, they are not likely to lead white moderates to an understanding of what it is like to experience racism.

Most importantly, on King's view, phenomenal experience remains essential to motivation, even when our tendencies toward bias, distrust, and guilt are absent. Even without these tendencies, mere factual descriptions – emotionally flat, colorless descriptions such as impersonal statistics – are unlikely to move us to act. This is the key point, on King's view, about the importance of experiencing racism: experiencing racism is key to coming to understand the ways in which individual instances of racial injustice—say, bus segregation or racist signs—were just part of a larger system of racism. When the white moderates come to understand the pervasiveness of racism, they also come to understand the injustice of the current racist system. The resulting sense of indignation will make the white moderates more likely to act with urgency to end racism.

One might allow that there are passages where King claims that not having actually “felt the stinging darts of segregation” is the barrier to white inaction that must be overcome, but still wonder whether we should ultimately read him in this way. Why would King respond to the clergymen by writing the “Letter,” which is seemingly a work of description, if description cannot suffice? One might argue that King's goal in writing the “Letter” was to convince the white moderates to act by describing to them what it was like to be a “Negro under Jim Crow.” On this reading, the “Letter” would be a matter of description, powerfully eloquent on King's part, but not enough for the white moderates to experience what it was actually like.

This is perhaps the biggest challenge to the reading of King that I am proposing. I can only speculate on an answer. Perhaps, the “Letter” should be not understood merely as an attempt at factual description but also as a work of literary art. In creating this work of art, perhaps, King meant to do more than merely describe what it was like to be a Negro under Jim Crow. Perhaps, he meant to evoke a vicarious experience of what it was like in the reader.

In the “Letter,” King testifies to us, about the pain he experienced, in the form of a narrative. He does not merely list facts in the way that a policy analysts listing abstract statistics might. He used a variety of literary or rhetorical devices such as anaphora (“will we be extremist for hate or will we be extremists for love”); antithesis (“injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”); analogy (“just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we”); metaphor (“paralyzing chains of conformity”); similes (“... like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its

ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured”); and pathos (“see tears welling up in her eyes...Funtown is closed to colored people”). Because of its use of literary devices the “Letter” is evocative.⁵¹ Few of us can read the letter, let alone the rest of King’s work, without a sense of anguish, sorrow, regret, and, more importantly, a sense of indignation and fury.⁵² Perhaps, this was King’s intention. Perhaps, he wrote the “Letter” and his many other works to ignite readers’ imagination, enabling enable them to put themselves in the shoes of victims of racism and to simulate or vicariously experience what these victims experienced. King may have hoped to cause his readers to experience the very sort of suffering that black Americans experience when they are victimized by racism. In doing so, he may have hoped to rouse white moderates’ sense of indignation and to inspire them to action.⁵³

As one writer has noted, “Martin Luther King looked to Tolstoy as a kind of moral hero, a man in touch with the inner workings of the spirit.”⁵⁴ Leo Tolstoy famously claimed that art had the power to infect others with feelings previously experienced by the artist. Art is a human activity where “one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them.”⁵⁵ On his view, art is also essential to moral progress. It is “a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity.”⁵⁶ Perhaps, King agreed with Tolstoy and aimed to overcome racial injustice through literary art.

§3.

The paper makes six central claims.

1. Propositional knowledge that racism is wrong is often not enough to move people to end racism.
2. Phenomenal moral knowledge of what being victimized by racism is like is often needed to move people to end racism.

⁵¹ For a discussion of the literary devices King used in his oratory and writing see Jonathan Reider, *The Word of the Lord is Upon me: The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). Though to a lesser extent, this topic also comes up in Jonathan Reider, *Gospel of Freedom* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁵² In *Gospel of Freedom* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), Jonathan Reider argues that “black anger, not fancy philosophy, was the driving force behind the letter.” See also, Jonathan Reider, “King’s Righteous Fury,” *New York Times*, April 15, 2013. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/16/opinion/dr-kings-righteous-fury.html>).

⁵³ In “The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*,” *American Political Science Review* 106.1 (2012): 188-203, Melvin Lee Rogers makes a related proposal regarding W.E.B. Du Bois’s work. He argues that Du Bois’s used rhetoric “to elicit an emotional response in the reader that might generate a reasoned desire to alleviate the condition of African-Americans” (p. 195). He also briefly suggests that King had a similar project (p. 202). On the view that I’m suggesting here, rhetorical (and other literary) techniques elicit phenomenal experiences of racism and these experiences lead to anger which, in turn, leads to the desire to alleviate racism.

⁵⁴ Jay Parini, “There’s more to Tolstoy than War and Peace” *The Guardian*, January 6, 2010. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/jan/06/more-to-tolstoy-war-peace>.

⁵⁵ Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (New York: Thomas Crowell & Co. Publishers, 1899), p. 42.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 43.

3. Typically, when people come to know what it is like to be victimized by racism they come to have a sense of indignation.
4. Typically, this sense of indignation makes the desire to end racism more urgent and makes it more likely that people will be moved to end racism.
5. Typically, people come to know what it is like to be victimized by racism through experiences of racism.
6. People may be able to know what it is like to be victimized by racism vicariously through literary art that stimulates the imagination.

Like Douglass,⁵⁷ King believed that something more than propositional moral knowledge was needed to rouse people. However, unlike Douglass, King believed that more moral knowledge could solve the problem of white inaction. This puts him squarely in the camp of the intellectualist. What distinguishes his position from other intellectualists, such as Aristotle and Socrates, is the emphasis he placed on a particular sort of moral knowledge. On King's view, what would rouse the white moderates was not merely propositional moral knowledge but rather phenomenal moral knowledge. On King's view, because of the sense of anger that it would engender, the white moderates would be more likely to act after they knew what it was like to suffer from racism. In this way, King incorporates intellectualist and non-intellectualist elements into his theory of moral motivation.

Intellectualism, at least in the Socratic form, is the claim that when we have propositional moral knowledge, we will *always* be motivated to act appropriately. King did not make any universal claims about moral motivation. Unlike Socrates, King did not think that moral knowledge, of any sort, is *always* motivating. King merely claimed that we will *be more likely* to act appropriately when we have phenomenal moral knowledge. As mentioned, we can come to know what it is like to be victimized by racism, feel the relevant sense of anger, and still fail to be motivated to do something about it. This is especially true when one feels that one's actions, on their own, are unlikely to improve the situation. One might wonder, if possession of phenomenal moral knowledge isn't always enough to motivate us to act, doesn't this undermine King's intellectualism? Rather than undermining his commitment to intellectualism, we can see King as qualifying it in light of the possibility of motivational failure. Unlike more traditional philosophers, the sort of action that King is concerned with is not merely a one-off. The racism that King is concerned with is systemic and it will take more than one or two actions to undermine it. It will take sustained action over the long run to overcome racism. On King's view, phenomenal moral knowledge, through its activation of indignation, tends to motivate sustained action. It typically does so under certain conditions – namely, within the context of a social movement. It is only in this context that taking sustained action to end racism is rational, given the significance of the risk involved and the unlikelihood of success when one acts on one's own. Recognizing the barriers to moral action only makes King's commitment to intellectualism more compelling.

One might wonder whether King's position offers us anything novel. Almost all contemporary theorists of moral psychology hold that Socrates's intellectualism, as a universal claim, is false. It is obvious to many that one can have propositional knowledge that something is wrong and still fail to act appropriately. Like Du Bois and Douglass, many now hold that emotions (Sentimentalists) and/or desires (Humeans) are also

⁵⁷ See fn. 4.

essential to moral motivation. Furthermore, many have also come to recognize that moral action is only likely under certain conditions, emphasizing the context sensitive nature of moral motivation. Perhaps, in light of current discussions, some of King's views – such as his rejection of pure intellectualism – are obvious. Even if this is true, this is not a failing of his view. It is a strength. King's views are interesting precisely because they anticipate and link up with current discussions of moral motivation. He was concerned with the same sorts of questions that we are currently concerned with and proposed relevantly related answers. What ultimately makes King's views novel is the way they bring intellectualist and non-intellectualist considerations together into a coherent package, placing phenomenal moral knowledge at the center, to explain moral motivation.

Some, such as Paulina Sliwa, have perhaps come close to King's position on the importance of phenomenal moral knowledge, but there are important differences between their positions. Sliwa has recently argued for a notion of moral understanding as not only knowing that something is morally wrong but also knowing why it is morally wrong.⁵⁸ On her view, understanding “why an action is wrong generally requires you to know what (some of) its wrong-making features are.”⁵⁹ She suggests that phenomenal moral knowledge may be an important part of this aspect of moral understanding. On her view, “certain first-personal experiences may be essential to gain epistemic access to certain wrong-making features because these include facts about how the action affects the wronged party: what being the victim of this wrong is like.”⁶⁰ If we look at the white moderates through Sliwa's eyes, then it would seem that the white moderates lack moral understanding. While they know that racism is wrong, they do not know why it is wrong; and they do not know why it is wrong because they do not know what it is like to be victimized by racism.

Sliwa's position is certainly close to King's, but there are at least two important differences. First, King does not link phenomenal moral knowledge of racism with knowing *why* racism is wrong. King would agree with Sliwa that phenomenal moral knowledge can be helpful here, but, on his view, it is not necessary to know why racism is wrong. As we already know, King, like Du Bois and Douglass, held that the white moderates knew why racism was wrong, despite not knowing what it was like to be victimized by racism. They knew that racism was wrong on the basis of rational argumentation. Second, this is why King's picture of phenomenal moral knowledge is linked with moral motivation and action and not merely knowledge of why something is wrong. King's central claim is that phenomenal moral knowledge is often essential to moral motivation. On his view, the white moderates both knew that racism was wrong and why it was wrong and yet were still unmoved. What explained their inaction, according to King, was the lack of phenomenal moral knowledge of racism. It is this emphasis on the connection between phenomenal moral knowledge and moral action that makes King's position interestingly different from Sliwa's.

King's conclusions about the relevance of phenomenal moral knowledge raises its own important questions. How can the white moderates come to know what it is like to be victimized by racism? I very tentatively suggested that King may have believed that

⁵⁸ Paulina Sliwa, “Moral Understanding as Knowing Right from Wrong,” *Ethics* 127 (2017): 521–552.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 548.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 549.

the answer lied in his writing. He may have believed that reading his “Letter” could help the white moderates to vicariously experience being victimized by racism and, in turn, to acquire phenomenal moral knowledge of what it was like. Even if this was King’s view, it is far from being fully convincing. There are many remaining questions. How exactly can art cause vicarious experiences of racism in other people? Does imagination play a causal role? If so, how are works of literary art – such as narratives – connected to imagination? Do these works somehow stimulate imagination or somehow make it easier? Is imagination of being victimized by racism, even when it is repeated over time, enough to know what it is like? And so on. In the end, King’s arguments may raise more questions that they purport to solve. This is, in part, what makes his arguments philosophically interesting. They raise further questions about moral motivation that are worthy of further investigation and development.

Even if King was ultimately wrong about the role that literary art could play in stimulating vicarious experiences of racism, there may be other more direct ways for the white moderates to have experienced what being victimized by racism was like. This is something that King didn’t seem to consider.

John Howard Griffin a novelist and white native of Dallas, Texas took a six-week bus journey on the bus through racially segregated states such as Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. In an attempt to know “what it is was like” to be black in the Jim Crow South, Griffin darkened his skin so that he could pass as a black man during his travel.⁶¹ He took large oral doses of an anti-vitiligo drug and spent up to fifteen hours each day under an ultraviolet lamp. Among other things, he was chased down the street by a white man shouting racial epithets. He was told that he was waiting in the “wrong” room and had to move to the “blacks only” room. In one instance, when Griffin was at a park, he was approached by a white man and told politely to leave, despite the fact that the park was not segregated.

According to his own testimony, Griffin’s experiences helped him to know what it was like to be wronged by racism and, in turn, to be moved to take action to end racism. Despite numerous death threats, Griffin wrote and published the book *Black Like Me* – a detailed narrative of his experiences during his six week travel – in the hopes of enlightening people about what it was like to suffer from racial oppression and moving them to act.⁶² Because he was white and could avoid the sorts of bias and distrust that were likely to result in the case of black testimony, Griffin may have been in a better position than black individuals to rouse prejudiced whites to action.

Some will be tempted to ask, did Griffin really experience what it was like to be victimized by racism? Some might claim – as Rachel McKinnon has – that experiences like Griffin’s fail to fully capture the phenomenal character of being racially oppressed.⁶³ Griffin can always “escape” his experience, namely, by revealing a white identity that he

⁶¹ Griffin said that he held to his own rule of not changing or altering his identity in any other way. If he was asked who he was or what he was doing, he was committed to telling the truth.

⁶² John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (New York: Penguin 1960). Though it is far beyond the scope of this paper, I would argue that, like the “Letter,” *Black Like Me* goes beyond factual description and is a work of literary art. On this see, Hugh Rank, “The Rhetorical Effectiveness of Black Like Me,” *The English Journal* 57.6 (1968): 813-817. As this article notes, Griffin was a published novelist and used literary devices to tell his story. In doing so, his hope was to convince more white Americans to take action.

⁶³ Rachel McKinnon, “Trans*Formative Experiences,” *Res Philosophica* 92.2 (2015): 419-440, see especially p. 433.

can be said to “belong” to. Along these lines, some might argue that it is the inescapability, the of lacking of an “out”, that truly characterizes an experience of racism and gives rise to the sense of suffering and pain that King described. McKinnon’s claim is that Griffin lacked this sort of experience.

In response, it is worth noting that there can be significant costs associated with revealing one’s white identity in these sorts of cases. At many times during his journey, Griffin felt his “black” identity was inescapable. Griffin would have faced serious and potentially even life threatening costs if his white identity was revealed to the wrong people at the wrong time. He may have experienced the inescapability of his “black” identity as painful and, overtime, anger inducing. While there are very few white people who experience these sorts of costs in relation to opting out of their “black” identity and into their white identity, it is at least possible. In these cases, white individuals come very close to genuinely experiencing what it is like to be victimized by racism.

Of course, even if this is right, Griffin’s experiences of racism are very difficult to replicate and because of this have been rather rare. This is why it is all the more important to explore King’s claim about literary art and its potential to elicit vicarious experiences in more detail. If he is right about art, then the possibility for moral progress is much greater.